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Psalm 46
Matthew 7:21–29

"The crowds were astonished,
for he taught them as one having authority"
Matthew 7:28–29 (NRSV)

The question should not be "WWJD—What would Jesus do?"
but "What would Jesus have us do?" The onus is not on Jesus but on us,
for Jesus did not come to ask semi-divine human beings to do impossible things.
He came to ask human beings to live up to their full humanity. He wants us to live in the full implications of our human gifts, and that is far more demanding. . . .
We are meant to live as bravely and fully in our world and time as Jesus lived in his.

Peter J. Gomes
The Scandalous Gospel of Jesus:
What's So Good About the Good News?

The images on the evening news were perplexing, disturbing. Agents from the Texas Child Protection Agency and Texas Rangers took custody of 462 children under the age of eighteen from the Yearning for Zion Ranch in Eldorado, Texas, operated by the Fundamentalist Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints. Most of us, I suspect, had never heard of the FLDS. And we were amazed to see pictures of the women—in long, solid-color dresses, long-sleeved, no makeup, uncut hair arranged peculiarly, their facial expressions severe but curiously unemotional as the government took away their children. A group of them subsequently went to court, won the opening skirmish, and now the Texas Supreme Court has ruled that the children must be returned to their parents—assuming the parents can be identified. We learned about the FLDS, which broke away from the Salt Lake City Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints, the Mormons, early in the last century over the issue of polygamy, or plural marriage. We learned that there are about 10,000 members of the FLDS, with their headquarters and temple in Hildale, Utah; that their leader, Warren Jeffs, is in jail on sex crime charges, convicted of accessory to rape for ordering and participating

in the marriage of an underage girl to an older man. We learned that the FLDS teaches that a man having multiple marriages will receive the highest form of salvation, that a man should have a minimum of three wives. (Warren Jeffs, some estimate, has seventy-five.) We learned that the leader assigns girls of marriageable age—which in the FLDS is considerably younger than the State of Texas says it ought to be—to an older man who will become her husband and that the FLDS has excommunicated 400 boys and banished them, it is suspected, to eliminate competition for wives.

As I watched all this, I found myself asking, “How does something like this happen? And what responsibility does the state, do the rest of us, have for it?” But a deeper question is how the human intellect, the capacity for rational, critical thinking and decision making, can come to terms with something like that. I heard a lot of people say about those women, sitting in rows, looking placidly into the camera, that they must be drugged. It simply doesn’t seem possible that fully rational people would be part of that.

It is, I conclude, finally a matter of authority. Each of us, in one way or another, makes a fundamental decision somewhere deep in our heart about who or what will have authority for us, who or what will be the bedrock on which we build a life.

Psychologists have identified “cult behavior”: a total and absolute commitment to an idea or a charismatic leader, a deep paranoia—“it is us against the world”—and a willing suspension of critical thinking. We have learned over the years how powerful and sometimes tragic the result is when those dynamics come into play and individuals make a decision to grant authority to the cult or the leader, in matters large and small, life and death.

Roger Shinn, a very distinguished scholar and teacher of Christian ethics, says that there are three basic types of authority. The first is external, based on power. It’s the authority of the state, the police, the school principal. It is articulated every day when the child asks, “Why do I have to brush my teeth, tuck in my shirt, eat these brussel sprouts?” and a mother says, “You’re going to do it because I said so.”

Second, a completely internal authority concludes, “I’m my own authority, and I’ll do what I want to do.” It’s a favorite in a culture that has been called narcissistic. Everybody’s favorite song at some point was Frank Sinatra’s “I’ll Do It My Way”—I’m my own authority.

And finally, there is an authority, Roger Shinn says, based on truth. It depends on the individual’s reason and logic and intellectual struggle to determine what is true. It does not require the willing suspension of critical thinking. Quite the opposite—it demands it, and it becomes authoritative

and transformative when we say, “I will live like this. This is who I will be. This is my authority.” It happens deep in the heart, and it is close to religious conversion, that decision about authority.

The issue of authority emerged over and over again in the life of Jesus. He had it. People recognized it early in his career and throughout. It was certainly not authority based on power; he had none. And it was anything but internalized narcissism—“I’ll do it my way.” Instead, it was based, I believe, on the content of what he said and the coherence of his words and the way he lived. People heard what he said and saw how he lived, and they were astonished and compelled, and they followed, and he became the rock-solid foundation of their lives.

At the end of the Sermon on the Mount, a collection of Jesus’ ethical and moral teachings, which appears in chapters 5 through 7 of the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus says that what matters finally is not the words we say, but the life we live. What matters finally, that is to say, is not our theology, our creeds, but our behavior. He used a dramatic image: A life based on his teachings is like a house built on a solid foundation. A life not based on his ethic is like a house built on sand, which is washed away.

“The crowds,” Matthew reports, “were astounded at his teaching, for he taught them as one having authority, and not as their scribes.” “Their scribes” were the moral authorities. If you had a question about an ethical or moral matter, a question of right and wrong, you went to a scribe, and he told you what the law said, chapter and verse. And so to say Jesus had authority not like their scribes was to say that in him there was an authenticity, a coherence between words and deeds, a compelling congruity that they had simply never seen before, and they were astonished. His words, the scholars often tell us, are not totally unique. Most of what he taught in the Sermon on the Mount has roots in the Jewish law. But when he said, “Love your enemies,” he actually did it. He reached out in love and forgiveness to his own enemies, critics, persecutors—even, one dark Friday afternoon, to his executioners. They had never seen anything like it. Others had said, “Don’t worry about the future; trust God.” But he actually did it, lived like that. When he said, “Blessed are the poor in spirit, blessed are the meek, the merciful, the poor in heart,” he lived like that, and people were astonished.

The invitation in this text is to put him in that place in your life where you decide who and what will be authoritative for you, who and what will be the foundation upon which you are willing to live your life. Does that mean that you and I are capable of obeying and living up to every ideal, every command? Does it mean that you and I will never again be angry, never experience inappropriate desire, that you and I will never strike back, that you and I will never again do anything that might be construed as self-

serving, and that you and I will always and forever love our enemies, including the neighbor who is driving you crazy and whom you cannot stand? I hope I will not be judged that way. None of us is up to this—all of it, all the time.

With its high and holy moral standards and demands, the ethical teachings of Jesus could drive us to despair, except for the fact that it is Jesus who teaches and forgives. It is Jesus who holds us to these high and holy standards, and it is Jesus who sits down at table with sinners.

The invitation is to put him and his teachings in the place in your heart where you make daily decisions about how to live, whom to obey, whom to trust and follow.

Why Jesus and not someone else? Why Jesus and not "your own little voice," as someone famously put it? Why Jesus and not Karl Marx or the gurus of market capitalism? Why Jesus and not my own agenda, desires, and wants?

Long ago I had the privilege of sitting in a small seminar with a distinguished biblical scholar on the topic of the Sermon on the Mount and the authority of Jesus. His name was Marcus Barth, son of the great Karl Barth. It was he who taught me that what Jesus calls us to in these seemingly impossibly demanding standards is not something alien to us, but something deeply a part of us. It's what Peter Gomes meant when he told a congregation of students at Harvard that Jesus does not ask us to do superhuman things. He asks us to live up fully to our humanity. He asks us to live as bravely and fully in the world as he did. Jesus calls us to be the kind of men and women God has created us to be, and when we live like that—even when we fail, disobey, stumble, and fall—we are becoming what God means for us to be, sustained by the love and forgiveness of Jesus Christ.

I keep discovering, as I struggle with his demands, that Jesus keeps making sense. Love is better than hate; violence does not work and only and always precipitates more violence; it is, in fact, happier to give than to receive; and to give your life away is to come fully alive. I keep discovering that he was right: Those are statements of reality. They are the truth, and so they have authority.

I keep discovering that he does not expect me to suspend my ability to think and reason and come to my own conclusions. Quite the opposite—the gospel of Jesus Christ has forced me to think harder and longer than anything else in the world.

I keep discovering that the world becomes a better, kinder, gentler place where he is and people strive to live as he commands us to live. Everywhere

in the world where he is present through his followers and what they do in his name, the hungry are fed, the homeless sheltered, the sick cared for, the grieving comforted, the lost welcomed home, the children protected. He has authority because the world he envisioned is a better, more peaceful, more life-giving world.

St. Francis of Assisi once said to his monastic brothers, “Go forth and preach. And, if you have to, use words” (David James Duncan, *God Laughs and Plays*, p. 33). I keep discovering the perfect symmetry in Jesus between words and deeds, the dynamic of unforgettably challenging ideas and concepts, and an equally unforgettable life: a man who in the truest sense talked the talk and walked the walk. I keep discovering in Jesus the truest love that poured itself out, gave life away literally, died—for us—and that has authority for me.

In the midst of the FLDS fracas and the ceding of authority to a cult leader who abuses young girls and in the midst of a primary election struggle and the ill-advised and intemperate rhetoric of Christian clergy, both Protestant and Catholic, that has finally forced a candidate to resign from his church, there is another small drama playing out this weekend.

It, too, is about authority. December 2006, Private First Class Ross McGinnis, nineteen, from Knox, Pennsylvania, was driving his Humvee in Iraq. His unit came under fire. A live grenade came through the gunner hatch and landed in the compartment of the vehicle where four of Private McGinnis’s buddies were sitting. The door of the Humvee was to his left. All Ross McGinnis had to do was pull the latch, bail out, and save himself. Instead, nineteen-year-old Ross McGinnis threw himself on the grenade, took the full impact, died, and saved the lives of his four friends.

By happenstance I discovered that a member of Fourth Presbyterian Church has a nephew who is close to the McGinnis family. The member called me on Friday and asked us to pray for the McGinnis family. They are going to the White House tomorrow to receive the Medal of Honor for their son, for extraordinary heroism, posthumously.

I telephoned Romayne McGinnis, Ross’s mother, in Knox, Pennsylvania, last night, told her who I was, and asked permission to tell her son’s story. She seemed pleased and agreed. I told her we’d be praying for her and her family. I told her we are grateful for her son and his heroism. I asked if they were church people, Christians. “Yes,” she said, “we’re members of St. Paul Lutheran Church, where I grew up, was married, where Ross was baptized, confirmed.”

“I’m afraid he wasn’t much of a churchgoer,” she said. And I said, “He got the message.”

The McGinnis family is not of one mind about this war, as Americans are not: whether we should have invaded, whether our being there is a good idea, whether whatever we intend is worth the lives of our sons and daughters. But in the midst of all that, a young man, in his nineteen years, came to the conclusion that the highest, holiest thing anyone can do is give life away for the sake of others.

That is the idea that Jesus expressed and embodied, an idea that has become truth for his followers, authority that always, forever, each time we see it, is astonishing.

They were astonished and compelled not because Jesus was a political leader. He wanted none of that. Not because he was rich and influential and powerful. He was none of that. They were astonished at the authority of a love that reaches out to all, an unconditional love that accepts and affirms and celebrates every man, woman, and child, a love that gives life away. They were astonished at his authority, and so am I.

Amen.